

SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUE INTERESTS

General Viljoen, the head of the South African Defence Force, has acted swiftly and spoken frankly about the case of the three South African soldiers killed last week on Zimbabwean soil. He explained that the three with their fourteen black soldiers, had been on an unauthorised mission; and he has expressed regret for what happened. This is an important development. For, despite the avowed intent of the South African Government to live in peace with its neighbours, there have been suspicions lately that those in South Africa inside the security forces, who believe that the de-stabilisation of neighbouring states is in South Africa's interests, are not being effectively restrained.

Acts of violence and sabotage, both in the front line states and against opponents of the South African Government elsewhere, have been on the increase in recent months. The Minister of Works of Lesotho was murdered earlier this month; the opposition Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA) is thought to have been responsible. The Mozambique Resistance Movement (MRM) has been active in its own country; in one attack, two weeks ago, a train was ambushed and fourteen passengers killed. Last week Dr Ruth First, a prominent member of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress, was killed by a letter-bomb in Maputo. Dr First had been involved in organizing a conference supported by the United Nations; last March,

following an anti-apartheid conference here - also backed by the United Nations - the African National Congress in London was blown up.

Someone is doing these things; and on the face of it, it would be strange if a government devoted to the overthrow of terrorism, to paraphrase General Viljoen, were to condone such acts. South Africans may justly retort that the policies of some African countries hardly need the assistance of South Africa in order to become unstable; and they can reasonably point to the existence, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, of factional and ethnic divisions within African societies.

But the case of the South African soldiers killed in Zimbabwe is different in kind from the others because - as in the case of the attempt by white mercenaries last November to overthrow President René of the Seychelles - there can be no doubt that high-level South African acquiescence or support, official or unofficial, was involved. At the very least the failure of the South African military authorities to restrain their men from adventures inside Zimbabwe - in an area not far, either, from Mozambique - was a major sin of omission by South Africa.

Exile movements and some African politicians tend to attribute all acts of terrorism and sabotage in the region to South Africa; even where there are no traces whatever

of South African involvement they argue that it is self-apparent that such subversion is in South Africa's interest. But is it? South Africa's major need, surely, is to build bridges with other African states and to seek to convince them that, whatever their disagreements over apartheid, economic and political reality demand a measure of peaceful co-existence. It cannot be in South Africa's true interests to sow discord inside neighbouring states and to respond to terrorism with counter-terrorism.

The problem with General Viljoen's commendable frankness, however, is that he has given some credence to the notion that South Africa is involved in other acts of subversion in the region. It is therefore urgent that the South African Government should state clearly that it seeks peace with its neighbours; it can reasonably demand that, in return for guarantees of South African non-interference in their internal affairs, neighbouring countries will agree not to become bases for the activities of guerrillas acting against South Africa. General Viljoen, in disassociating himself from the activities of some members of the security forces, has made a good start; Mr P. W. Botha should now speak. It is not, and cannot be, in South Africa's interest to allow a free hand to the opponents of the regimes of neighbouring countries, even granted that it feels threatened by the covert activity of some of these regimes within its own borders.